The Fourth Church Pulpit

ORIGINAL RESPONSIBILITY

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15, Matthew 25:14-30

Have you ever noticed that what you get for being responsible is more responsibility? It is axiomatic in the volunteer sector: do a good job and you will be asked to do another, usually a bigger one. Sometimes it seems, in churches particularly, that the more you do the more you are asked to do until a reaction sets in: too many meetings, too many evenings out, too many phone calls. Ecclesiastical burnout. Sometimes people drop out altogether — take a leave of absence from church. Sometimes they seek out another church in which they can be anonymous for a while. There is a system: sneak in, sit in the back pew, leave during the last hymn, never shake a hand and, for sure, never sign anything. With our long narrow nave and balconies, one of the services we provide our sister churches is a refugee center for ecclesiastical burnout victims. If you are creative, you can get in and out of here for years without ever identifying yourself.

It is axiomatic: the reward for being responsible is more responsibility.

Jesus told a story about it once. I turn to it a lot because I believe it is one of the most relevant stories in the Bible for those of us living at the end of the 20th century.

It's about a man of substance, a land owner, who is going on a journey. He summons his servants: gives each of them a portion of his resources to manage while he is gone. He assigns responsibility on the basis of ability. Nobody is asked to do something impossible here. One servant receives a lot: five talents. Another receives a modest amount: two talents. The third servant is given one talent.

What to do next? It's not their money. They are entrusted with its safekeeping but it doesn't belong to them. It would be more than unfortunate if a man should lose his master's assets. The first servant traded with his five talents which can be, I am told, fairly risky business. And, if you want to double your investment, the risk factor escalates. No pain — no gain. Sometimes you win, more often you lose at that level of risk. If you can't afford to lose you shouldn't be playing the game. So the fact that this man takes a substantial portion of his master's assets, invests in a way that doubles his money is very significant.

The second servant, the one with two talents, does the same. Goes to market with his money, does a little buying and selling, a little real estate speculating, grain futures maybe, and comes out with twice what he put in.

These are two remarkably courageous and/or foolish individuals. Maybe it's both. They're certainly willing to take a chance with someone else's money. Far more comfortable for the temperament of most of us is the sensible behavior of the third servant. This one digs a hole in the ground. Hides the money. An interesting dimension to this story is that is exactly what Rabbinic law advised.

> "Whoever buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course possible." [*Matthew*, Eduard Schweizer, p. 471]

This, that is to say, is a conservative, prudent man. He doesn't take chances. He follows tradition. He does what is expected and normal under the circumstances. Jesus is setting up a situation of enormous contrasts. And the fact that he is about to invert the expected outcome must have taken the breath away from those who first heard this story.

The master returns and requests an accounting. Servant number one reports and his master says: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave: you have been trustworthy in a few things: I will put you in charge of many things: enter into the joy of your master." The same thing happens with number two. No mention of the risks they took: no mention of what might have happened had they lost it all. Just — success rewarded with more responsibility.

And then the third servant reports. "You are a harsh man," he says. "I was afraid. And so I hid your money. Here it is. All of it. I haven't lost a bit. It's exactly what you gave me." This man is treated as harshly as anyone in any of the stories Jesus told. He is stripped of all his possessions and unceremoniously kicked out, and his money is added to the amount earned by the first servant. "To all those who have, more will be added" Jesus said in summary. And what he meant was responsibility.

The responsibility theme is there from the very beginning.

Human beings are created by God at the end of the marvelous process of creation. But there is a difference with these creatures. God fashions them, blows breath into them and then, alone of all creatures, speaks to them. These beings are created for conversation, dialogue, relationship. They are, the original story contends, made in God's own image.

That image is our glory — and our responsibility. God gives human beings work to do. They exercise dominion over the rest of creation. They are to manage the place. Much like the land owner in Jesus parable, God gives human beings the run of the place and says: "Here, see what you can do with it" and then returns and asks an accounting.

Original glory — original responsibility. Before there is any mention of sin, of wrong doing, of guilt and culpability in the Bible, there is human glory and responsibility. It is what is original about us.

When things go wrong, when the old story turns to the topic of why things are not the way they are supposed to be in creation, it is very much a matter of responsibility — or refusal to accept responsibility.

Given the garden to enjoy and to tend, Adam — man/Eve — woman quickly disregard the basic rules and abdicate responsibility. Eve lets a snake talk her into eating forbidden fruit. Adam lets Eve talk him into it. When they are caught by God, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. Human beings, that is to say, are not only willfully proud and disobedient, they are also unwilling to live up to their glory and their responsibility. Their original sin is not sexual at all. Original sin is irresponsibility.

The ancient church had a perfectly good word for it — "sloth." The old confession says: "We confess our sinful nature prone to evil and slothful in good." I always thought that was a helpful phrase. The human dilemma is not simply that we are vain, selfish and egocentric, that we want to be gods, that we are too full of ourselves, but that we don't aim high enough, don't know ourselves as responsible, moral agents placed here with God's image in us, God's confidence in us, and the work of God's creation before us.

Harvard theologian, Harvey Cox, in an essay on the ancient sin of sloth, points out that the word comes from a Greek word — "not caring."

> "Sloth" he said "is the determined and lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity . . . the refusal to be fully human."

In a series of essays in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* on the Seven Deadly Sins, called *The Sins of Summer,* American author Thomas Pynchon wrote about and played with the sin of sloth. "What's really wrong with it?" Pynchon asked. Sloth is not so bad — there are no symposia on sloth, no sloth task forces, no government hearings on sloth. In fact, Pynchon said sloth has its proponents and cited a *National Enquirer* article about the King of Spuds contest — to locate the top couch potato in the United States. The winner was a 35-year-old bachelor from Fridley, Minnesota, who said "All I do is watch television and work." He keeps three television sets going twenty-four hours a day and watches a fourth on the job. "There's nothing I like more than sitting around with a six pack of beer, some chips, and a remote control. The TV station even featured me in a town parade." He went on, "they went into my house, got my couch and put it on a float. I sat on the couch in my bathrobe and rode in the parade."

But then Pynchon gets deadly serious by suggesting that whenever fascism — or totalitarianism of any kind raises its head, as it did in Germany and Italy, in the 20s and 30s, and in the totalitarian Marxist regime after the war and today, with the surprising strength of the Skinheads and neo-Nazi groups, it is because people are not responsible. In a particularly trenchant sentence he wrote,

> "Sloth is despair bought at a discount price, a deliberate turning against faith in anything because of the inconvenience faith presents to the pursuit of quotidian lusts, angers the rest."

The late Karl Menninger wrote a book twenty years ago, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, in which he argued that there is something about this century which has served to reduce the significance of the individual. Life seems to be in the hands of giant cosmic forces not accessible to the individual. Instead of actors on the stage of history, individuals feel like victims. "And the result," he said, "is the end of personal responsibility." Whatever goes wrong is someone else's fault: "them," the government, the company, the victims, my parents for not loving me enough.

Poking gentle fun at his own profession, he cited a little verse:

> "At three I had a feeling of
> ambivalence toward my brothers,
> And so it follows naturally
> I poisoned all my lovers.
> But now I'm happy: I have learned
> The lesson that has been taught
> That everything I do that's wrong
> Is someone else's fault."

Too many guns? Children killing children every day? Not my problem. Chicago's schools underfunded, understaffed and over-bureaucratized? Not my fault.

My nation's mortality rate for children under five is now 19th in the world, higher than North Korea, Ireland, Italy. And for African Americans, infant mortality is higher than Bulgaria, Poland or Cuba. Not my problem.

When President Clinton got to his sixth principal in introducing the Health Care Reform proposal he preached a little sermon on responsibility. I'm not sure everybody heard, so immediately tied up did we all become in what this is going to do to me and cost me. I heard it twice: once on television and once as part of a group of Americans who were invited to the White House last Thursday. It was a very festive occasion. I was thrilled to be there, and obviously the prideful sinner in me could not resist dropping into this sermon "When I was at the White House last week." Well, I was, and while we all know that the details and specifics of health care reform will be argued and fought and hammered out in the months ahead, it was a powerful moment when the President looked out at us: CEOs of hospitals, heads of thriving institutions, physicians, clergy, business people, . . . and said "Responsibility" and then risked political incorrectness by observing that irresponsible personal behavior, not a large corporate conspiracy, is behind the continuing spreading of the AIDS epidemic.

> "The highest teen pregnancy rate in the Western World is not only a result of poverty and the lack of access to birth control," the President risked saying, "it's because teenagers are making irresponsible decisions."

The new head of the Center of Disease Control, David Satchen, said the greatest avoidable threat to our health is not a virus or a bacteria, it's violence . . . an epidemic of deadly weapons.

> "What other country in the world," President Clinton asked, "would allow angry, unemployed, alienated adolescents to arm themselves with more and better weapons than the police?"

We will have a better health care system and a better nation when we all - each of us - assume responsibility for our own lives and the life of the community.

People who live under oppressive and totalitarian political structures know it and we who are so privileged to live in freedom must always listen carefully.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn — exiled from the former Soviet Union wrote,

> "Mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business."

And Vaclav Havel, speaking to the United States Congress, as Czechoslovakia threw off the yoke of totalitarianism:

> "The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart... in human responsibility.
>
> "Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success — responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged."

In his new book, *Race Matters,* Cornell West argues that the incredible violence that characterizes life in urban ghettos stems from and contributes to a sense that life has no value — mine — or yours. So what's it matter if it comes to an end.

West thinks there is a nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities:

> "The lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness.
>
> "The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world." [p. 14]

The Christian faith knows about a sin of not caring, of not loving one's own life enough, of not aspiring and striving and reaching high enough.

Karl Menninger wrote:

> "The message is simple. It is that concern is the touchstone. Caring. Relinquishing the sin of indifference." [p. 189]

Jesus Christ, we believe, came to show us what human life is meant to be. He came to show us how to live fully by living for others; to live responsibly by caring for the welfare of our neighbors, by loving ourselves so profoundly that we have high aspirations, high hopes, high and noble dreams for ourselves, our communities, our families, our nation.

To be connected to him, to become the disciple of this Lord, I believe, is not merely to agree to a list of beliefs. It is not only the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is a conversion of attitude and behavior. It is to experience a renewed responsibility for your own life and the life of the world. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high, and care deeply. It is to hurt when brothers and sisters hurt, it is to be angry at injustice, it is to be willing to be responsible.

What can make that happen? What can call new responsibility out of us and activate our actual conversion? Not the scolding of a preacher certainly. Not guilt. Religion has tried that too often. Not fear or dread or threat of punishment. What seems to call responsibility out of us is love, unconditional love, love so amazing it seeks us out and claims us and reminds us of who we are and whose we are, a love that picks us up, dusts us off and tells us we are God's beloved children before we are anything else.

In 1961 Robert Coles, now a distinguished child psychiatrist, professor at Harvard, and bestselling author, became intrigued with the moral character and strength and courage of four black six-year-old girls who were chosen by a federal judge to initiate school desegregation in New Orleans.

Coles has written extensively about one of those little girls, Ruby Bridges. In a new book, *The Call to Service,* he tells about another six-year-old, Tessie. Every morning federal marshals came to her house and escorted her to school through crowds of white adults, screaming obscenities, threatening her life, promising to kill her parents and burn her house down. Coles has been thinking and writing about those children's character for thirty years.

Where did that courage come from? For Tessie, he concluded, it was her maternal grandmother, Martha, a handsome woman in her fifties who had lived with poverty and pain — but who had a "big laugh that shook her ample body and was punctuated by a clap or two of her hands and a two-word exclamation 'Lord Almighty!'"

It was Martha who delivered Tessie to the federal marshals each morning. Coles was there and remembers the scene:

> "The marshals arrived in their cars promptly at eight in the morning. And as they approached the door she would fling it open, greet the men, and greet the day: 'Lord Almighty, another gift!' Tessie would emerge from behind her, lunch pail in hand, and go off with those tall, white, dark-suited men, who carried revolvers beneath their jackets . . . to walk through the lines of jeering, cursing, sometimes spitting white men and women."

One morning Coles was there and Tessie didn't want to go to school. She was discouraged, afraid and Martha said:

> "It's no picnic, child. I know that — going to that school. Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you and call all those people to my side and read to them from the Bible and tell them he's up there, Jesus, watching over all of us. I'm not the one to tell you should go . . . but I'll tell you you're doing them a great favor — those folks — you're doing them a service. . . .
>
> "You see, my child, you have to help the good Lord with his world! He puts us here and calls us to help him out."

Tessie put her breakfast dishes on the sink, got her raincoat and lunch pail and went to school.

Our Creator has given us so much — so much of life and love and privilege — and the responsibility. God, we believe, has work for us to do — beginning with caring deeply, valuing our own life, acknowledging that we are responsible and experiencing responsibility for our lives and the life of the world.

Perhaps for you it is a work project you have avoided because to fail is risky. Perhaps it is a big decision, a big life change, a move, a job change, an end to a relationship, the beginning of a new one. And perhaps it is simply your need to hear and to know that your life is precious to God. You have dignity and original glory because you are, and always will be, God's beloved child.

For each of us there is work to do. No — it may not be easy work. It may be demanding, frightening, challenging, risky.

But God, I believe, is like that wonderful ample grandmother standing in the doorway, greeting each new day, loving us with such strength and confidence that we can emerge from behind her with confidence and courage, safe in a love that will never let us go.

Original Responsibility.

Amen.